2: Boissevain E-5 (1960-1961) 1965
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house to house, transform the streets into gaily lighted tunnels. The piazza is usually draped in flags, and all the clubs are also dressed in their festal finery and their doors thrown open to the public. Many bands are hired and the mountains of fireworks are fused and made ready. All this is done before the visitors from outside arrive, and involves a great deal of organization, time and money.

The festa is thus an occasion on which communal values are reaffirmed and strengthened, as individuals and groups express their loyalty to their patron saint and unite to defend and enhance the reputation of their village. At the same time, the central position which the Church occupies in the social structure is strongly reinforced, for the parish church is the hub around which this festive occasion turns.

A festa is also an occasion on which the bonds of kinship are reinforced, for each family opens its doors to its relations, especially to those who live in other villages. Grown sons and daughters return to their parental home, forming, for a few hours, a grand family with a depth of three or four generations. Because of this influx of relatives, younger children learn to recognize more distant relatives whom they might not see at any other time of the year, and become aware of the network of kin relations that stretches out from their home. As parents become momentarily more indulgent during the festa and relax their watchfulness, it is also a favourite meeting time for courting couples and a traditional occasion on which marriageable boys and girls are introduced to one another.

The celebration of a village festa usually lasts three days. It consists of religious ceremonies, which take place principally within the church, and secular celebrations outside the church. The Maltese themselves make a distinction between these two elements in the festa: they call the former the 'internal feast' (*il-festa ta' ġewwa*) and the latter the 'external feast' (*il-festa ta' barra*). These often take place simultaneously. The mixture of sacred and profane which results was shown to me very vividly during one of the first festas I attended. I was in the church during a particularly solemn moment in the service of worship. Suddenly there was a nerve-shattering burst of fireworks from the roof of the church. Then, slowly, the sharp smell of burning gunpowder began to drift in through the open doors and mingle with the pungent odour of candles and incense. After that I ceased to be

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
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796 the Canons of the Cathedral then says mass and the ceremony is over.

At the conclusion of this procession there is a scene of general confusion throughout the whole village of Zeitun. Priests, friars, *fratelli*, cross and standard-bearers, men and women of all classes, especially country people, and of these unfailingly the most recently married couples—all in their best attire and with a grand display of jewels and gold (*)—are seen going to and fro, buying and eating sweetmeats [493] and cheese cakes. Then again hundreds of all sorts of vehicles, from His

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[675] [584] (*) Till lately, young women residing in the country insisted before they were married on its being particularly stipulated in the marriage contract, that their husbands should take them to Casal Zeitun on St. Gregory's day, to Valletta on St. John's day, and to Boschetto on the feast of SS. Peter and Paul, on the 29th of June.

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
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the day they were married and when they were buried. They were therefore always employed within doors, and never went out, except at a very early hour to church, when they were entirely covered by a long mantle. This costume came originally from Sicily, and reached from the head to the feet, the forehead and eyes alone being visible. The upper part of the mantle, covering the head, was cut in a different manner for unmarried women—these wearing it shaped round, while married women wore it pointed.

WEDDINGS

Marriages in Malta were always entirely arranged by the parents; who for the greater part consulted only their own interest, and the suitable-

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
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•584 ness of the connection, without at all consulting the inclinations of their children.

[675] [431] [583] The articles of the contract having been settled, and the marriage portion agreed upon, the young man sent his intended bride a present consisting of a certain fish ornamented with garlands of ribband, with a ring or some costly jewel in its mouth.

The first interview was then fixed to take place in presence of the parents and their kinsfolk, best friends, and neighbours, who were regaled with sweetmeats and other refreshments.

[989] Before this meeting took place, the mothers of the two young people retired either into an arbour in the garden or some separate apartment, where they prepared a mixture of aniseed, aromatic plants, salt, and honey

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
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with which they rubbed the bride's lips, with the idea of rendering her affable and prudent. She was then conducted into the room where her future husband awaited her arrival, who presented her with a ring on which was engraved two hands united—the emblem of mutual faith—together with bracelets, necklaces and a gold chain —she presenting him in return with a handkerchief trimmed with lace and bows of ribbon.

This ceremony is called "il chelma" which means the engagement.

On the morning of the wedding-day the most honoured personage among the husband's relations threw a fine white veil over the bride's head—who wore a brocade or velvet dress, in which the other relations made certain rents for the purpose of affixing small golden shells.

8:Brockman T-5 (no date) 1938
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at the wrong season and so set right his error. The blessing is accompanied by the burning of leaves of the wild olive which have been blessed in Holy Week. Blessing, accompanied by sacred "fumigation," is very widely used—by fishermen to ensure a good catch, by newly married folk to ensure a happy house.

771 782 [226] [585]

GETTING MARRIED

Zeppu and Grez will think long and seriously before they get married. In an island where poverty is the rule rather than the exception, and there is no "dole," there can be no haphazard mating. Zeppu will wait until he has a sufficient competence and Grez will contribute her share of the common resources in the form of a "dot" which she, herself, has earned and saved. Until very recently all marriages were arranged by a professional "go-between"—an old woman wise in the ways of the world and in suitable matings. Even now there is little choice left to the girl.

584 [735]

In this matter of marriage, so hedged about with Christian law and custom, the Old Things still command a place. Their hands are perhaps more apparent than in the marriage customs of all other countries—themselves pagan enough in origin.

584 824

In the story which has been quoted the month of February is praised, amongst other reasons, because it is then that the "small-leaved basil" is tended and watered. The reference might be rendered "In the Spring a young man's fancy . . ." for the sweet basil is the sign and symbol that a marriageable girl awaits a suitor.

The small bush, either of basil or of the Madonna rose, is carefully tended and placed on the sill of an upper window. A well-grown plant is an indication that the maiden will make a good wife and mother.

[787]

A suitor, seeing the "marriage bush" at an upper window,

8:Brockman T-5 (no date) 1938
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584 824 will walk up and down the village street wearing a red carnation behind his right ear and a red handkerchief thrown over his left shoulder. The shy maiden will be peeping from behind the latticed window, probably accompanied by one or two giggling, curious younger sisters.

The symbolic bush has about it something of the atmosphere of the Song of Solomon:

> My beloved is unto me as a
> cluster of camphire in the vineyards of En-Gedi . . .
>
> I am the Rose of Sharon and
> the lily of the valleys. . . .
>
> A garden inclosed is my sister, my spouse . . .
>
> Awake, O North Wind; and come, thou south;
> blow upon my garden that the spices
> thereof may flow out.
> Let my beloved come into his garden,
> and eat his pleasant fruits.

[822] [171] The red carnation and the red handkerchief, badges of the lover, are of that colour which is sacred to Venus. The wearing of the flower has its parallel amongst the Polynesians, to whom a red flower behind the right ear means "I am looking for a sweetheart."

584 Official "courting" will not begin until the "go-between" and the parents have arranged matters to everybody's satisfaction.

585 801 171 After the religious ceremony the young folk separate, returning to their homes for a period of eight days before setting up house. The reason for the choice of the number "eight" may not be without significance; for eight, it is said, was one of the signs of the goddess Astoreth, while the ancient Egyptians had a company of eight gods who were the Fathers and Mothers of the World. The double form of the figure "8"

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was anciently used to represent the tying of Life with Spirit. 585
Its association with the "True Lovers' Knot" of our grand- 801
mothers is obvious. There is Biblical authority, too, for the 171
separation of husband from wife, in the incident between Tobias and the Angel Raphael.

Tobias (or Tobit) is about to be wedded to the maiden whose former seven husbands have been slain on the bridal night by an evil spirit. The angel says, "For they who in such manner receive matrimony as to shut out God from themselves to their lust, as the horse and mule, which they have not understanding. Over them the devil hath power. . . . Keep thyself continent from her. . . ."[1]

So far the marriage customs which remain extant—only one or two generations separate Zeppu and Gretz from the more primitive customs. Here is what a Maltese writer has 584 ● to say of marriages in the not very distant past:

> "The articles of the contract having been settled, and the marriage portion agreed upon, the young man sent his intended bride a present consisting of a certain fish ornamented with garlands of ribband, with a ring or some costly jewel in its mouth.
>
> The first interview was then fixed to take place in presence of the parents and their kinsfolk, best friends, and neighbours, who were regaled with sweetmeats and other refreshments.
>
> Before this meeting took place, the mothers of the two [789] young people retired either into an arbour in the garden or some separate apartment, where they prepared a mixture of aniseed, aromatic plants, salt, and honey with which they rubbed the bride's lips, with the idea of rendering her affable and prudent. She was then conducted into the room where her future husband awaited [301]

[1] *Tobias*, VI, 17–18.

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584 [301] her arrival, who presented her with a ring on which was engraved two hands united—the emblem of mutual faith—together with bracelets, necklaces, and a gold chain—she presenting him in return with a handkerchief trimmed with lace and bows of ribbon.

This ceremony is called *il chelma*, which means the engagement.

585 [292] [301] On the morning of the wedding day the most honoured personage among the husband's relations threw a fine white veil over the bride's head—who wore a brocade or velvet dress, in which the other relations made certain rents for the purpose of affixing small golden shells.

[533] The bridal procession then proceeded to the Church for the ceremony, attended by musicians playing on different instruments, and singers who sang stanzas in praise of the young couple. These musicians were preceded by three men, the first bearing on his head a basin of white earth on which was placed a big cake with two figures representing the bridegroom and the bride—the [431] man who carried this basin wore also a scarf with a round cake hanging from it. The second carried a basket filled with sugar plums and candied nuts, which one of the relations distributed among such acquaintances he hap- [532] pened to meet. In the middle of the basket was a handkerchief folded in the form of a pyramid and ornamented with the images of the Blessed Virgin, St. Joseph, and the Infant Jesus. The third man was constantly employed in burning perfumes. The bride and bridegroom followed, walking under a canopy of crimson velvet carried by four of the principal persons who attended the wedding. The rest of the relations and invited friends, called the *Haddara*, closed the procession.

[202] The arrival of the bridal procession at the church was announced by the ringing of bells. The officiating

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The officiating priest was then presented with a basin containing a cake, a handkerchief, and two bottles of wine—the usual fee on such occasions. When the marriage ceremony was completed, everyone returned from church in the same order as before.

As the newly married couple wended their way to their house, the women and girls who crowded the balconies showered flowers upon them also nuts and grains and wheat, and on their entering the house one of the kinsfolk threw from one of the windows or balcony a few handfuls of barley and some small coins on their heads.

The nuptial feast took place immediately afterwards; but the bride ate in a separate apartment. The repast being ended, she was seated next to her husband and drank out of the same cup.

At a village wedding the company danced during the feast, each dancer throwing a piece of money to the fiddlers and each guest contributing a fowl to the repast.

The bride always passed a week in her father's house, after which she was received with much pomp by her husband, whose relations gave a great feast which was called *il hargia*."[1]

The bridegroom's symbolic present of a fish is very likely connected with fecundity, for the fish was regarded as an emblem of fecundity by the Assyrians and the Phoenicians. It is not, however, in this connection alone that the fish is a potent symbol. Prudence (apparently a virtue highly prized in a Maltese wife—Salt, another symbol of prudence, is included in the ingredients with which the bride's lips are anointed), and Wisdom were anciently supposed to be the properties of numerous Sacred Fish. Finn M'Cull, in the Irish legend, "Happens upon the Salmon of Knowledge . . ."

[1] BUSUTTIL, op. cit.

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174 584 825 which conferred on him "such Wisdom, Prowess, and good fortune . . . that Fame and Prosperity always attended him thereafter." Tennyson, describing his mystic Lady of the Lake, has:

> And o'er her breast floated the Sacred Fish.

The Saviour Himself was symbolized by the early Christians as a fish. Julius Africanus, an early Christian writer, said of Christ that He was the Great Fish, caught by the Hook of God, whose flesh nourishes the whole world.[1]

This bridal fish, then, may be in some sense a sacramental offering as well as a mere symbol.

584 789 828 The anointing of the bride's lips is yet another custom which, like the miniature "garden inclosed" of the marriageable girl, recalls the Canticle of Canticles:

> Thy lips my spouse are as a dropping honeycomb, honey and milk are under thy tongue. . . .[2]

585 174 The whole of this marriage ceremony is reminiscent of the old Fertility cults—the cakes, sweetmeats, nuts, grain, all in honour of the fertile Mother whose bountiful Earth is carried in a bowl bearing effigies of the bride and bridegroom whom it is hoped she will bless with her own fecundity and riches.

EVERYDAY HABITS

771 788 Grez, the housewife, will go about her daily tasks carefully following a thousand small rules, most of which have their English parallels. She will never cut a loaf without first making the Sign of the Cross on it with forefinger or knife. If the loaf falls to the ground, she will kiss it by way of asking pardon. She will not sweep her house after sunset for fear of [754] sweeping away good fortune. She will take care not to throw her "combings" out of doors. Should anyone wish her ill it

[1] *The Lost Language of Symbolism.* [2] *Song of Solomon*, IV, ii.

9: Luke G-5 (ca. 1920-ca. 1960) 1960
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he cares to attend the Cathedral of Mdina, the island's earliest capital, on the 4th November, he will hear a Mass said for the repose of the soul of Roger the Norman, Count of Sicily, who ended the Arab occupation of Malta in 1090 and is there commemorated as "Deliverer of Malta and Founder of the *mensa* [table] of the Cathedral, the Bishop and the Canons." Should he chance to be in Malta before the beginning of Lent he will have the opportunity to witness in the carnival festivities not only the jollifications common to other Mediterranean carnivals but also features of more local interest, such as the Parata dance on the Palace Square, which takes its symbolism from the capture of a Maltese bride by a Moslem corsair.

If he prolongs his stay into the summer he will see on the 29th June, the feast of S. Peter and S. Paul, one of the most characteristic of Maltese popular functions in the densely thronged Mnarja races. These races, for horses and donkeys, are of unknown but undoubtedly great age. The course is a piece of straight, hard road leading uphill towards the big square in front of Mdina, a square known as the Saqqaja. Here, from his great stone box, the Grand Master in former days, in these days the Governor of Malta, hands the banners of victory down to the winning competitors, while interested spectators watch the proceedings from two smaller but similar boxes, flanking the Grand Master's and belonging to some of the leading families of the island.

The name Mnarja is a corruption of the Latin *luminaria* (illumination), for it was the custom on that day to illuminate the churches of Mdina and the adjacent Rabat in honour of the two saints. A more picturesque if unfortunately less trustworthy tradition derives Mnarja from Hymen, the goddess of marriage, it being supposed that the young men of the island were formerly in the habit of choosing their wives from among the maidens crowding to watch the contest. This much, at all events, may be urged in support of the latter theory, that until modern times Maltese brides

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527 would insist on the stipulation being inserted in their
173 marriage settlement, their *kitba taz-zwieġ*, that their husbands
●584 should take them to the Mnarja every year.

The banners given in prizes to the present day are long
526 and narrow pieces of brocade of different colours called
361 *paliu*, which it is the custom of the fortunate winners to take back to their casals to be used as the altar-cloth of the parish church for the ensuing year. The casals, it should be explained, are the 'villages' of Malta, if 'village' is the appropriate term, for they are stone-built compact townships with populations often running into five figures. The Maltese word for them is *hal*.

291 Again, our visitor will learn that the *faldetta* or *ghonnella*—the true Maltese term is *stamina*—of the Maltese women does not owe its existence, as some people allege, to the need for defence against the excessive gallantry of Bonaparte's troops, but is of much more ancient origin. If proof were needed, there is in the Royal Malta Library a print of the year 1576 showing a Maltese lady wearing the national head-dress. The *ghonnella* is a voluminous hood of rich silk—black everywhere save in the villages of Zabbar and Zejtun, where it is blue and is called *xurqana*—stiffened inside the top edge by a piece of cardboard about a yard long, one end of which rests on the head, while the other end has to be held. Originally, it was really, like the Turkish *charshaf*, a skirt or petticoat (which is what the word *ghonnella* means) thrown up over the head. Later it was curtailed, for which reason it is sometimes called *nofs ghonnella*, a half skirt; but it is still cut to show the placket-hole—in point of fact, half the placket-hole—of the garment from which it has sprung.

[191] This striking and picturesque mode of female adornment or, rather, concealment constitutes Malta's one characteristic article of dress and is the local method of shrouding a woman's face and form, a custom common to southern latitudes from as far east as India to as far west as the Azores,

9: Luke G-5 (ca. 1920-ca. 1960) 1960
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although the Maltese form was probably dictated by the need to cover the head when entering a church. Its one drawback is that it takes up a lot of space, more space, unfortunately, than is available in the motor-bus, modern Malta's form of land transport. Let it be hoped that it will survive these disabilities, for it is not only unique but also an asset if those of the younger generation who have abandoned it in favour of the banal dress of everywhere else would only realize the fact, enhancing beauty while discreetly veiling any imperfections. These young ladies should ponder the words of Monsieur André Maurois in his little sketch of Malta:

> When its wearer moves, the *faldetta* is filled with air, and the Maltese girls, tripping in twos and threes along the streets, look like flotillas of graceful barques with black sails, blown along their course by the wind of destiny.

Oddly enough another French visitor and Academician anticipated by just a century, and in almost the same terms, Monsieur Maurois's charming flight, or perhaps echo, of fancy. Monsieur de Lamartine, visiting Malta with his English wife in 1832, describes the *ghonnella* as

> a half-cloak of black silk . . . of a light texture caught by a breeze, suggesting the sail of a skiff whose capricious folds alternately conceal and reveal the mysterious figure of the wearer, which seems able to escape at will from its embrace.

In the Malta of an earlier age, when the lives of Maltese women and girls were closely circumscribed, the *ghonnella* was not the only aid to their seclusion. Those who wander about the country districts will notice here and there that the older farmhouses have no windows giving on to the street; the Maltese countrywoman, like her Spanish sister, had to turn her face inward, not outward. But what the houses had, and some still retain, were stone brackets on the outer wall, made to hold the pots of sweet basil which showed that

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562 342 584 824 291

a marriageable daughter lived within. One pot of basil to each marriageable girl. So the potential swain could tell at a glance whereabouts to loiter for a discreet preview and what address, should he be interested, to give to the marriage-broker.

[pp 31–55 of Text not processed. Plates facing pp 40, 41, 48 and 49 have been processed].